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Nicaragua's 'Zero' Option

In legend he is part Zorro and part Crazy Horse—a Nicaraguan folk hero who once brazenly stormed and captured the National Palace on behalf of the Sandinista revolution. But a year ago the charismatic "Commander Zero"—Edén Pastora Gómez—angrily broke with the revolution, threatening to drive his former comrades "with bullets from their mansions and Mercedes Benzes." This week marks the anniversary of that fiery promise. By various accounts last week, Pastora had already slipped back into Nicaragua's mountains or was making final preparations in Mexico or Panama. His ultimate intentions and his timing were clear enough. Before he disappeared from his exile base in Costa Rica, Pastora said simply: "The time for words will be over come April 15."

Pastora may or may not be ready to start trading bullets with the Sandinistas this month. But if he is, the counterrevolution stands to pick up legitimacy and to gain a second front balancing the anti-Sandinista foothold in the north (NEWSWEEK, April 11). If the rebellion widens, the rebels will have to prove that they can fight together. Pastora has always derided the northern-based guerrillas as a collection of CIA agents and right-wing remnants of the Somoza dictatorship. The northerners in turn have long distrusted Pastora as a slippery leftist with suspected links to Cuba. To make any progress, the feuding dissidents must somehow match the delicate feat of the earlier Sandinista revolution: to form a broad marriage of convenience to oust the latest common enemy in Managua.

Unity will not be easy for the anti-Sandinista forces. Pastora heads the military wing of the Democratic Revolutionary

Alliance, a collection of moderate opposition groups based in Costa Rica. He and another alliance leader, Nicaraguan businessman and former junta member Alfonso Robelo Callejas, originally tried to start up a peaceful dialogue with the Sandinistas, appealing for a mixed economy, democratic politics and freedom of speech. The Sandinistas ignored the appeal. The moderates then lost an ally when Fernando (El Negro) Chamorro—who had gained revolutionary fame by firing a rocket at Somoza's bunker from a nearby hotel—took his Armed Nicaraguan Revolutionary Forces to join the CIA-backed shooting war out of Honduras. "The word 'dialogue' does not exist in our dictionary," Chamorro declared.

Taking Sides: Another sturdy opposition movement among Nicaragua's east-coast Indians is just as divided. Those supporting Indian leader Brooklyn Rivera have sided with the exiles in Costa Rica. But militants under Rivera's rival, Steadman Fagoth Muller, have helped carry the battle in the north, where they "fight one day and plant seeds the next," as Fagoth puts it. Fagoth has mixed feelings about Pastora. "When he spoke of bullets and called for arms last April he made us listen," the Indian leader said. "But some of our kids got excited, fought prematurely and died."

The CIA's no longer secret war may have forced Pastora to get moving or miss the counterrevolution. If he now joins the war, the anti-Sandinista forces at least will have achieved a measure of agreement on strategy. A way might open for some practical cooperation as well. Many of Robelo's supporters in Costa Rica are businessmen who, with their counterparts in Honduras, for-

merly worked together in the anti-Somoza Higher Council of Private Enterprise. In addition, the major rebel group in Honduras, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), has opened a political directorate in Costa Rica. "We respect the FDN [Directorate] very much," Robelo said, adding that the competing groups "could establish a relationship but I don't think it will be a fusion or unity—more of a coordination."

So far, the anti-Sandinistas in Honduras have fielded fewer than 5,000 guerrillas against a 22,000-strong Nicaraguan Army that has yet to commit its best troops. In the south, Costa Rican officials have blocked any similar guerrilla buildup in their territory. Pastora can probably count on only about 400 guerrillas trained in Costa Rica—fighters thought to have already infiltrated southern Nicaragua. Instead of deploying an army, his allies are banking on Pastora's reputation and mystique to rally their countrymen against the Sandinistas. His agents have been organizing opposition within Nicaragua for more than six months, according to Robelo. "We will be ready to act at any time," he said. "This could be a military action, strikes, sabotage, protests or whatever is needed."

As a moderate alternative, Pastora appeals to neighboring governments that are becoming uneasy with Nicaragua's leftward tilt and militarization. Much like the Sandinistas in their time, Nicaragua's latest rebels generally call for a social-democratic government and a nonaligned foreign policy. "We are fighting the Cubans, Russians, Bulgarians—all the bandits of the world who are now living as the kings of our people," said a guerrilla based in Honduras. "They better all go back to Cuba because if they stay in Nicaragua they will die." With or without Pastora's help, Nicaragua is bound for more violence. If the guerrillas have their way, the country will move from revolution toward civil war.

STEVEN STRASSER with JOSEPH HARMES
in San José